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Contras Need a Success Soon, Crowe Says

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The nation's top military officer said yesterday that Nicaragua's contras offer the best hope of protecting U.S. gains in Central America, but he acknowledged that the rebels must have "some kind of success" soon to maintain the support of the American public.

Adm. William J. Crowe Jr., chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, added in a breakfast meeting with Pentagon reporters that he could not estimate how long it would take the contras to force the leftist government of Nicaragua to change its ways. But if the contras fail, he said, "the chiefs certainly would be opposed to direct U.S. involvement."

Crowe, who was asked to specify what he sees as the U.S. military objective in supporting the contras, replied that "it is part of our overall policy to protect our gains" in Central America and "contain Nicaragua so she doesn't interfere with what we've already done."

"We would like to see the contras succeed in obtaining a change in the way the government of Nicaragua does its business" so it becomes "more pluralistic, stops its repression and brings the contras into the political process," Crowe added.

"We have a good prospect" of achieving those objectives "if we are determined and hang in there," he continued. "You've got to have some kind of success" with the contras to keep the United States committed to the cause. "I don't know of anybody that would ask the American public to go along indefinitely without progress," he added.

Crowe's assessment that the contras have "a good prospect" of moderating the Sandinista government contrasts sharply with that of retired Army general Paul G. Gorman, who formerly headed the U.S. Southern Command, which oversees military activities in Central America. The views of these two four-star officers represent the poles of military opinion which Congress must examine as it decides whether to approve President Reagan's request for \$105 million for the contras in fiscal 1988.

"I don't think they [the Sandinistas] regard the contras as a serious threat," Gorman told the Senate Armed Services Committee on Jan. 28. "I think they've got the situation under control. Therefore, why should they be considering changing their ways of doing business?"

Gorman, who serves on a presidential panel assessing U.S. strategy, faulted the Reagan administration's emphasis on giving the contras guns and sophisticated equipment rather than helping them wage the kind of unconventional warfare that proved successful for the Vietcong in the Vietnam War. The Vietcong moved through Vietnamese cities and countryside with relative ease, especially at night.

"A sound, unconventional warfare campaign does not involve people with guns up front," Gorman told the committee. "It involves a lot of patient preparation of the battlefield. Unless and until you have got the ability to move at will in the society that you want to attack, you are not going to be an effective insurgent They [the contras] are not that kind of force, partly because the Central Intelligence Agency has failed to train them for unconventional warfare."

The contra force, Gorman continued, is "a cross-border raiding force. We are talking about people who have received a modest amount of weapons training and a lot of fancy web gear, some good weapons. But I do not think they have got the apparatus in the country that would enable them to be militarily efficacious."

"Unless and until we are able to launch a genuine unconventional warfare campaign, the use of that kind of military instrument is not an option that the president of the United States has," Gorman said of the contras.

While declaring "it ought to be possible" to build an intelligence network in Nicaraguan cities so rebel forces could successfully wage unconventional warfare, Gorman said, "I have not heard anyone describe a plan that would in the long haul say we are going to have an alternative to the Sandinista re-

gime. I do not see a way out of our present difficulty."

Gorman recommended that the U.S. military take over the training of the contras from the Central Intelligence Agency. Crowe said he had "a bias" in that direction but added that the CIA had been "very skilled" in some of its training.